

An Action Research on the Development of Special Education Propagation Activities

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Abstract

In the trend of inclusive education, guiding students appreciating individual differences is vital. In Taiwan, it is common to utilize special education propagation activities to facilitate students' appreciation of individual differences. This action research was to explore the planning process and outcomes of special education propagation activities through the circulating process of plan-act-observe-reflect.

The teachers and students in the elementary school where the researcher serve were the participants in this study. The researcher planned school-wide and grade-wide special education propagation activities, and these activities were carried out in multiple forms, including posters, special education films, the theater performances and other forms. The common types of disabilities, the ways to assistant students with disabilities and the assistive devices they need are suitable topics to cover in special education propagation activities. In the five-year period study, the researcher found that reflection is critical when planning special education propagation activities. In addition, a variety of activities increased students' participation. The results of this study can be used as a reference for practitioners when planning special education propagation activities.

Keywords: special educational, propagation activities, inclusive education

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Introduction

Under the trend of inclusion, general education and special education have been placed in the same system for mutual development(Niu, 2015). Inclusive education includes the tangible, physical environment and the intangible, psychological environment; it is intended to provide all students with adaptive learning experience. Special education teachers and general education teachers should be used to design curricula that satisfy student needs. The diversity created by individual differences lies in the value of inclusion. In classrooms, what instructors care most about is how to respect individual differences among students and to accommodate their needs.

From my observations on the teaching scene, inclusion find that although students with special needs are placed in the normal class, they may not be accepted by general education students or become acclimated to the class. According to Niu(2008), the practice of intervention programs in the middle of the semester can help promote general education students' understanding and acceptance of students with special needs. One of the special education teachers' mission is to help special education students acclimate to the class. Hence, in elementary schools, special education propagation activities as well as a series of activities and campaigns are arranged each semester to promote the awareness of special education.

The collaboration of general education and special education benefits more students with the same needs and encourages acceptance of differences for the realization of inclusion. A survey of domestic special education propagation activities-related research(Tan, 2009 ; Chuang, 2010 ; Liou, 2013 ; Chen, 2014 ; Chien · Huang & Chen , 2014 ; Lai, 2015 ; Liu & Yang, 2016)indicates that special education propagation activities can improve the understanding of special education students and peer acceptance, decrease conflicts and misunderstandings, and facilitate positive peer relationships.

As general education teachers present higher needs for special education propagation activities(Tan, 2009), the activities has become an important annual event. In the school where I teach, special education propagation activities has been in place for years. From August to December each year, activities is organized and hosted. An after-event survey is conducted to collect homeroom teachers' feedback to gauge how well the event was held. It was found that the results of the survey are not quite acceptable, with respondents representing only 60% for the communication effect of the event. Further interviews with the homeroom teachers found that the teachers would love to see more categories and richer content in the promotional activities. In their opinion, the special education propagation activities was not organized in a way that would attract students' participation. In other words, the effect of these promotion events on special education did not reflect what is found in the relevant literature and was below expectation. This provides motive for this research, which aims to provide solutions for the practical problems and for the development of special education propagation activities programs which better fit the needs of the students.

Action research refers to research imitated to solve problems encountered in practical work scenes(Tsai, 2000). The purposes of the action research are to deliver practical results through a series of actions, evaluations, and reflections to help teachers improve teaching quality by modifying classroom activities, and also to help students

learn better(Koshy, 2010). Through new actions brought about by reflections, teachers can advance their professional development and expand their knowledge and expertise(Altrichter, Feldman, Posch, & Somekh, 2008). In action research, teachers are simultaneously workers and researchers; they identify problems at the scenarios and design action plans. Through reflections and problem-solving actions, they can apply their experience to the work situations.

This paper employs action research to design and implement action plans. Through reflections, modifications, and re-implementation, this research aims to improve the performance of special education propagation activities at the actual education scene. The word *development* used in this research refers to the process of reflections, modifications, and implementation.

Purposes and Questions

The focus of this research is special education propagation activities. By interviewing homeroom teachers, I collected their opinions and suggestions about the events; the results can be used for the development of special education propagation activities. A questionnaire survey was conducted after the event for evaluation. The research objectives and problems are as follows:

1. Discussion of appropriate special education propagation activities
 - 1-1 What problems were encountered during the development activities?
 - 1-2 How is activities developing?
 - 1-3 What modifications have been made in response to the problems encountered?
2. Analysis of the effect of special education propagation activities implementation
 - 2-1 Did the modified activities fulfill the advertised purpose?
 - 2-2 How did homeroom teachers view the modified activities?
3. Reflections on and growth of activity development of resource teacher
 - 3-1 What are the reflections and lessons of resource teacher throughout the special education propagation activities development?

Literature Review

Special Education Propagation Activities and Its Effect

Positive peer relationship is the key factor for children to develop social adaptive skills(Mathur, & Rutherford, 1991). Many scholars have recruited students with various special needs as research participants(Chan, Lang, Rispoli, O'Reilly, Sigafos, & Cole, 2009 ; Gus, 2000 ; Mathur & Rutherford, 1991 ; Wallace, 2010 ; Watkins, O'Reilly, Kuhn, Gevarter, Lancioni, Sigafos, & Lang, 2015). By using peer mediated intervention(PMI) as the special education propagation activities, participants' target behaviors are modified in a way to improve peer acceptance and social adaptation.

PMI can be divided into direct and indirect types(Mathur & Rutherford, 1991). The indirect type refers to the intervention in the target behavior by indirect means of experience sharing, demonstration, role play, support skill training, and problem solving. The direct type refers to the use of direct means, whereby peers give reminders, enhancements, and guidance to the participants in order to change the

target behavior. The number of peers can be one or more(Mathur & Rutherford, 1991). For the multi-peer PMI, participants can have more chances of practice and the generalization effect can be enhanced.

The literature with different types of special education students participants, including students with emotional and behavioral disturbance(EBD)(Mathur, Rutherford, 1991), students with autism spectrum disorders(ASD)(Chan, Lang, Rispoli, O'Reilly, Sigafos, & Cole, 2009 ; Watkins, O'Reilly, Kuhn, Gevarter, Lancioni, Sigafos, & Lang, 2015), and students with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder(ADHD)(Wallace, 2010), indicates that PMI can help children to develop social skills, decrease participants' improper behaviors, and provide more chances to practice getting along with others.

In Gus's study(2000), ASD students were the research participants and PMI was implemented in the class. By introducing what ASD is like to the class, the researcher successfully bonded the participants with the peers, changed the peers' attitudes and behaviors towards the participants, and thereby improved participants' social adaptation in the classroom.

Research has shown that PMI is a fitting and effective way in teaching social skills for the following reasons(Mathur, Rutherford, 1991):

1. Convenience: there are already many peers in the school environment;
2. PMI concept corresponding to the core spirit of inclusion;
3. PMI providing more chances for practice.

In Taiwan, PMI is often practiced through the form of special education propagation activities. In the implementation of activities in schools, characteristics of students with special needs are introduced to all teachers and students, in an attempt to promote the understanding of the students with special needs among teachers and students in normal classes, change their attitudes and behaviors, and help students with special needs acclimate themselves to the class.

Methods

This paper employs action research, in which problems are identified in the research field. Both qualitative and quantitative data are analyzed in order to design action plans. Through the implementation of the action plans, post-implementation reflections, and re-implementation, the performance of special education propagation activities is improved.

Research Field and Participants

The purpose of this research is to track the development of special education propagation activities. The participants in the study are all teachers and students in the school. The researcher is the school's resource teacher. The research field is the elementary school where the researcher works and where the activities are organized every August and held between September and December.

Process

This research is divided into five phases: 1. Problem identification; 2. Action plan development; 3. Implementation, reflections, and modification; 4. Re-implementation; and 5. Report creation. See Table 3.1 for the research phases, details, and schedule.

Table 3.1 Research phases, details, and schedule

| Research phase | Details | Schedule |
|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Problem identification | Finding the original special education propagation activities that does not fit Collecting literature and data Identifying problems) Not enough categories are covered) Not enough information is provided to assist and deal with students with special needs) Students show lack of interest in participating in these activities | August 2012 |
| Action plan development | Referencing the literature and data collected Designing action plans | August 2012 |
| Implementation, reflections, and modification | Implementing the action plans Reflecting based on the data collected Modifying activities | September 2012 to December 2016 |
| Re-implementation | Implementing the modified activities | |
| Report creation | Compiling data and writing reports | January 2017 to June 2017 |

This research spans a five-year period, from August 2012 to December 2016, during which five special education propagation activities events were held. The annual activities is organized between August and December and will be modified for implementation in the coming year.

Tools

1. Researcher

In this research, the researcher collected the data, designed and implemented special education propagation activities, reflected upon and modified the activities, and re-implemented the modified activities.

2. Supplemental tools

Supplemental tools used in this research included the after-event feedback questionnaires for homeroom teachers and the minutes of interviews with the homeroom teachers.

To gather data on how well home teachers understood the students with special needs, giving assistance and dealing with students, the students' acceptance level, and class management, a questionnaire survey was conducted. Interviews with the homeroom teachers were also conducted to gather their opinions and suggestions about activities.

Data Collection and Processing

Through interviews with the homeroom teachers and a questionnaire survey, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected.

A. Qualitative data processing

The qualitative data were based on the minutes of interviews with the homeroom teachers. The coding rule was specified in the first place. See Table 3.2 for data coding explanation. After the interviews, minutes were compiled and sorted in the coding step. Suggestions as to how the activities should be modified were brought up after the data were analyzed and reflected upon.

Table 3.2 Explanation of the data coding

| Coding examples | Explanation |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| Int.2012 | 2012 teacher interview minutes |
| Post-Int.2012 | 2012 post-interview reflections |

B. Quantitative data processing

The quantitative data were derived from the questionnaire surveys among the homeroom teachers. The data were analyzed through the excel software.

Results

This paper employs the action research method and spans a five-year period. Though the annual special education propagation activities, the research tracks the development of activities and discusses the following issues.

1. Appropriate special education propagation activities

1-1 Problems encountered during the development of special education propagation activities

The original activities practiced at the school where the researcher works was fixed in regard to its contents: (1) Third graders' PMI; (2) Challenge games for fifth and sixth graders; and (3) Exhibition of students with special needs works. See Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 The original special education propagation activities

| Scale | Event name | Details |
|-------------|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Grade-wide | Third graders' PMI | A PowerPoint presentation for third graders : The resource class environments and teaching staff The provision of instruction service Common types of students with special needs in classrooms: Learning disabilities, Physical disabilities, Hearing impairment |
| Grade-wide | Challenge games for fifth and sixth graders | Experience activities |
| School-wide | Exhibition of students with special needs works | Public display of student works on the resource class wall |

Results of the post-event questionnaire survey:

- (1) 70% of the homeroom teachers thought normal class students developed a better understanding about students with special needs;
- (2) 60% thought normal class students knew better how to assist students with special needs;
- (3) 60% expressed an increased acceptance level of students with special needs by normal class students;
- (4) 64% expressed experiencing less trouble in class management;
- (5) 60% expressed an increased understanding of how to assist students with special needs.

Excerpts from the interview minutes:

"We have an ASD in class but ASD is covered in the promotion materials." (Int.2012-2)

"I'd like to see more information on how to assist and deal with EBD in detail and with examples. That will help students to know how to get along (with classmates with special needs), and the homeroom teachers with class management." (Int.2012-3)

"I suggest more easy-to-understand footage or pictures, or examples be included. That will make it easier for the students to understand." (Int.2013-1)

"There were too much lecture-based activities. I suggest the event include quiz games or film watching sessions to attract students' interest." (Int.2013-5)

"Students liked the experience activities pretty much. They provided a chance for the students to feel how others feel."(Int.2013-9)

Based on the interview minutes, the research found that under the trend of inclusion, ASD students were placed in the normal class; because of the practice of EBD identification that students with EBD and ADHD were placed in the normal class. As ASD, EBD, and ADHD have become the most common types of students with special needs in schools, the homeroom teachers would like to see more information on the three types being covered in promotion materials as well as ways to assist students with these disorders.

Interviews with the homeroom teacher found that the experience activities were

popular with the fifth and sixth graders and that these activities encouraged participation and were effective as means of promotion. These activities created more interactions than did other forms of special education propagation activities, which tended to be more lecture-oriented. Hence, activities which involve more interactions are more likely to result in higher levels of participation.

From the questionnaire survey and interview minutes, the researcher found the following problems:

- (1) Not enough categories are covered;
- (2) Not enough information is provided for assisting and dealing with students with special needs;
- (3) Students show a lack of interest in participating in these activities

1-2 The development of special education propagation activities

- (1) More disability types should be included.

As classrooms see more students with ASD, EBD, and ADHD, homeroom teachers would like to see more information provided on these disorders. In response to the suggestions made by the responding homeroom teachers, the researcher included information on ASD, EBD, and ADHD.

- (2) More information should be provided as to how to assist and get along with students with these disorders.

According to Gus(2000), before the introduction of types of students with special needs and traits was given to the students, the normal class students knew little about the behaviors and needs of the students with special needs. After the introduction, students was able to be more understanding and show more empathy and tolerance. While the original special education propagation activities focused on the traits of each disorder type, the modified activities includes information on providing assistance and dealing with students with these disorders.

As pictures can help students learn quickly and well (Tsai, 1999) the researcher included explanatory pictures in the modified activities materials to explain to everyone, and used video clips to further explain the traits of each of the disorders. There was also detailed information on what types of aid was needed by people with special needs and how to provide support and assistance.

According to Chaung(2005), the inclusion of positive model messages in the design of an affective curriculum can better respond to the meaning of positivity, which is the focus in positive psychology. Hence, the researcher included the positive model of the particular disability type to convey positive messages of needs and assistance as a modified PMI.

In the post-activity interview with homeroom teachers, the teachers mentioned that students were not familiar with the models introduced. The reason could be that the models were from the past so even though positive messages were sent, students could not relate(Post-Int.2015-1).

“Students are unfamiliar with the famous disabled people mentioned in the program so they don’t know how great these people were.”(Int.2015-1)

The researcher(Tsai, 1999)found that it would be better to use models of people with disabilities with whom students are more familiar in order to increase their identification with disabled people. Based on the literature and interview minutes, the researcher made a few changes by using pop singers and sports athletes the students were more familiar with as examples to highlight the positivity and strengths of people with the disorders.

(3) Increased level of participation

Interview minutes show that students felt uninterested in lecture-oriented special education propagation activities(Int.2012-7).

“I’d suggest spending more time on Q&As with the students than long lectures.”
(Int.2012-7)

“More plush toys and puppets may be used to warm up the audience.”
(Int.2013-10)

Therefore, the researcher enriched the special education propagation activities by replacing the lecture-oriented plan with one that had different activities(Post-Int.2012-7).

As for the school-wide activities, apart from the original work exhibition, there were poster displays, interactive bulletins, films, seminars, and audiobook appreciation activities. Public-interest groups were also invited to come to schools to promote awareness and understanding about people with disabilities. As for the grade-wide activities, more puppet shows were given to cater to the first and second grade audience. For the third and fourth grade audience, the PMI was aided with pictures, film clips, and quiz challenges. While the fifth and sixth graders still had access to experience activities, they could express what had been learned by painting and writing after the events.

The researcher’s design of school-wide and grade-wide activities aimed to encourage student participation through diverse activities.

1-3 Modifications made in response to the problems

Action plans were devised to solve problems encountered at the actual education scene. Table 4.2 shows the field-related problems, the corresponding action plans, and the modified activities.

Table 4.2 Field-related problems and the corresponding action plans

| Field-related problems | The original activities | Modified activities |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Not enough categories are covered. | Only learning disabilities, hearing impairment, and physical disabilities was covered. | Inclusion of information about ASD, EBD, ADHD, and visual impairment |
| Not enough information is provided to assist and deal with students with special needs. | Only the specific types are covered. | Inclusion of information about giving assistance and being with them, what aid would be needed, positive models |
| Students show a lack of interest in participating in these activities. | Too lecture-oriented | Expanding school-wide and grade-wide activities School-wide: printed promotion materials, films, seminars, and audiobook appreciation, promotion activities in public-interest groups Grade-wide: Puppet shows for first and second graders, more pictures and videos for third and fourth graders, experience and painting activities for fifth and six graders |

2. Analysis of the effect of special education propagation activities implementation
2-1 The advertising effect of the modified activities

The advertising effect is represented in percentage based on the data collected from the questionnaire survey. Table 4.3 shows the percentage before and after activities were modified.

Table 4.3 Percentages

| Topic | Percentage before modification | Percentage after modification |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Improving the understanding of normal class students about characteristics of students with special needs | 70% | 83% |
| Helping normal class students to know how to assist SES | 60% | 83% |
| Increasing the acceptable level of SES by normal class students | 60% | 83% |
| Decreasing teachers' trouble in class management | 64% | 83% |
| Helping homeroom teachers to know how to assist SES | 60% | 83% |

The table shows an increase in the percentage for each topic. In other words, homeroom teachers thought that the modified activities was more effective in introducing characteristics, explaining ways to assist, and improving peer acceptance; they also knew better about the students with special needs and encountered less trouble in class management. Hence, the modified activities proved to be more effective in the promotion of special education than the pre-modified activities.

2-2 How homeroom teachers view the modified special education propagation activities

Based on the interview minutes, it was found that homeroom teachers gave positive feedback about the modified activities and considered it as a practical and effective means of promotion. Some mentioned that the promotion materials were easy to understand with pictures and words. Some said the activities helped to develop empathy in normal class students and that the students could apply what had been learned to help their classmates with special needs. More positive feedbacks were received for the puppet show activity for first and second graders.

“Through the activities, students can better understand the lectures. The purpose of promotion has been met.”(Int.2016-3)

“Children become more empathetic. They now understand that some classmates do not mean to disrupt classes, and they are willing to help those classmates through some kind reminders.” (Int.2015-1)

“The words and pictures in the briefing material make it easy for students to understand. Very explanative and to the point!” (Int.2015-2)

“The material is easy to understand with the pictures. Students can grasp the ideas quickly.” (Int.2014-1)

“With pictures and the employment of progressive difficulty levels, the lectures are easy to understand and effective promotion.” (Int.2014-2)

“Children can form tangible ideas through the footage, which is effective as a means of promotion.” (Int.2013-3)

“It received positive feedback from the students. Very effective as promotion!” (Int.2015-4)

“The example of a tadpole turning into a frog is cool. Students can grasp the idea of

coming of age." (Int.2013-2)

"The lecturers' wording is close to students' needs. The ideas are very clearly expressed" (Int.2016-1)

"The activities are very well designed. A very practical program!" (Int.2015-7)

3. Reflections and growth of resource teachers

3-1 The reflections and lessons of resource teachers throughout the special education propagation activities development

From the personal experiences of implementation and reflections, the researcher found that the design of activities requires the input of teachers, and should consider the actual situations and needs, rather than repeating the same activities.

By including information on common types of students with special needs, ways to assist and deal with them, and aid needed in the promotion, students can form a better understanding of the characteristics and needs, including how to provide assistance and be with them. The activities should be designed in a way that is easier for the students to relate to their experiences, or including familiar personalities to resonate among the students. The activities should be more diversified to keep students interested and encourage student participation.

Suggestions

Systematic special education propagation activities can benefit both students with special needs and normal class students. Positive peer relationships are the key for children to develop social adaptation (Mathur & Rutherford, 1991). In addition to diversified promotion contents and forms, frontline educators can work on how to develop systematic activities based on what grade the student is in to allow activities to deepen as the grade level increases.

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